

Aristotle on virtue  
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### What a virtue is

A virtue is a trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life. Aristotle's word was *arête*, which can be more generally translated as an 'excellence'. Lots of things have 'excellences' in this sense, and virtues of mind and character are just specific examples. For instance, we use an axe to chop wood; a good axe will be one that chops wood well. To chop wood well, the axe needs to be sharp. And so being sharp is an excellence, a 'virtue', of an axe. Or again, eyes see (that's what they *do*). A good eye sees well. So clarity of vision is an excellence of an eye. Aristotle thought the case of human virtues was exactly similar. We have an idea of what it is to lead a life that is human, which he argued was activity in accordance with reasons. And so we can also have an idea of what it is to lead a human life that is good (*eudaimonia*). Virtues are traits that help us lead such a life.

There are two sorts of traits which are absolutely central to this. There is a trait of mind, called 'practical wisdom', which helps us to know what to do (see separate handout). And then there are traits of character. Some traits of character, such as being short-tempered or greedy, stop us from leading a good life – these are vices. Other traits of character, such as being kind or courageous, help us to lead a good life – and these are the virtues. Aristotle thought that the list of virtues isn't a miscellaneous collection, but grounded in a general, reasoned account of what virtues are.

### Traits of character

It is difficult to define exactly what character, and so a trait of character, is. For instance, what's the difference between character and personality? Whatever the details, character certainly involves a person's *dispositions* that relate to what, in different circumstances, they would feel, how they think, how they react, and the sorts of choices they make and actions they perform. So someone is short-tempered if they are disposed to feel angry quickly and often; quick-witted if they can think on their feet; intemperate if they get drunk often and excessively. Aristotle says that what reveals our character above all is what we find pleasant. But there is, of course, also the sorts of choices we make and reactions we show. And we may add the states and processes of consciousness – whether we are often anxious or experience tension, what we tend to think about, how self-aware we are. Character has a certain stability and longevity. Traits of character last much longer and change less easily than many 'states of mind', such as moods and desires (unless those express states of character); but character can change, and so it is less stable and long-lived than personal identity. Yet it is central to being the person one is, and changing one's character is not directly under one's control, and may be importantly determined in some ways by genes and by upbringing.

Many traits of character, then, involve our 'passions' one way or another. By this, Aristotle centrally means our desires and emotions, 'feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain'. He notes that some of these, particularly desires stemming from bodily 'appetites', aren't responsive to reasoning; if you're hungry, you're hungry and talking about it won't change it! But many are, at least to a limited degree. It is possible, through consideration of the matter – by 'giving reasons', to change the way someone (oneself) feels or to change what they want. Emotions involve judgments, e.g. anger involves the judgment that you've been insulted. If someone convinces

you that no insult was intended, your anger may wane. However, the passions are so-called because we are, in some important way, 'passive' in relation to them. We cannot generally, just by an act of will, change what we feel or want.

### **Virtues and the doctrine of the mean**

Virtues are traits of character 'in virtue of which we stand well with reference to the passions' (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.5). Virtues of character are dispositions to feel 'well', which is necessary if we are to live well (achieve eudaimonia). By this, Aristotle means 'to feel [passions] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (II.6). What is the right time, object, person and so on is what practical wisdom helps us to know. This provides the link to rationality, which Aristotle claims is our ergon. Our passions, we noted, are susceptible to reason. There can be right and wrong ways to feel passions, and the right way to feel passions is determined by reason. A virtue is a disposition to feel our passions in accordance with reason. If we feel our passions 'irrationally' – at the wrong times, towards the wrong objects, etc. – then we don't live well. Furthermore, given the very close connection between what and how we feel and what and how we choose and act, virtues are dispositions of choice as well (II.6).

Aristotle provided a framework for understanding what 'feeling (and choosing) in accordance with reason' means using his 'doctrine of the mean', the idea that a virtuous response or action is 'intermediate'. Just as there is a right time, object, person etc. at which to feel angry (or any emotion), some people can feel angry too often, regarding too many objects, and towards too many people (perhaps they take a critical comment as an insult), or maybe whenever they get angry, they get very angry, even at minor things. Other people can feel angry not often enough, regarding too few objects and people (perhaps they don't understand how people are taking advantage of them). Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not claim that when you get angry, you should only ever be moderately angry. You should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry. The doctrine of the mean means that we can (often, if not always) place a virtue 'between' two vices, e.g. cowardice-courage-rashness, spineless-good-tempered-short-tempered, and so on.

Philosophers have generally thought that even if it is true, the doctrine of the mean doesn't help us know what the right thing to do is. Just about anything could be 'in the mean' if the circumstances were right! But Aristotle never intended the doctrine of the mean to be helpful in this way. We can't 'figure out' what it is right to do by applying a rule like the doctrine of the mean; we must have practical wisdom. Aristotle says explicitly that what is in the mean is 'determined by the person of practical wisdom'. And life is complicated; so practical wisdom isn't about applying easy rules either. It's about 'seeing' what to do, which requires virtues of character – so your emotional responses are right – and lots of experience.

### **Acquiring virtues and being virtuous**

Virtues are necessary for eudaimonia, but because they are dispositions towards feeling passions, and passions are not under the direct control of the will, we can't simply choose to become virtuous. How, then, do we acquire virtues? Aristotle's answer is 'habit', in particular, the habits we form during our upbringing. In fact, in ancient Greek, the word for a virtue of character, *ethiké*, is a variant on the word for habit, *ethos*. To defend this claim, Aristotle must argue that virtues are not acquired just through teaching and that we are not virtuous just by nature. I concentrate on the second, but a quick point of the first: if virtues could be taught directly, like a skill, it should be possible for there to be an adolescent 'moral genius' as there can be with other skills, like mathematics or gymnastics. But it's very unclear that the idea makes any sense.

Against the view that virtues can be ‘natural’, Aristotle gives two arguments. First, given that virtues are dispositions to feel and behave in certain ways, we come to form these by what we *do*: but ‘of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity’. For example, you don’t acquire sight by seeing; first you have sight, then you can see. But ‘the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well [e.g. learning to play a musical instrument]. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.’ We are not naturally virtuous, but we are naturally capable of becoming virtuous, just as we are not born musical but can become so. Hence, ‘by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly...It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.’ (II.1)

But some people are more ‘naturally musical’ than others; couldn’t this be so with virtue? Yes, Aristotle allows that we can have good dispositions from birth, e.g. someone might be naturally kind. But this doesn’t amount to ‘full virtue’. A fully virtuous action is one that requires the agent to *know* what it is they are doing, to choose the act because it is in accordance with virtue (Aristotle describes this as ‘choosing the act for its own sake’), and to make the choice from a firm and unchangeable character (II.4). A naturally kind child doesn’t fully comprehend the nature of their action, and could easily be misled into being kind for the wrong reasons or at the wrong time. Without practical wisdom, virtue has developed into its fullest form.

### **Virtue: past and present**

There are many recognisable similarities between Aristotle’s concept of an *arête* of character and our modern concept of virtue. Both are the grounds for calling someone good or bad, for praising or blaming them for what they feel and do. Both are clearly dispositions of feeling and closely related to the sorts of choices people make. If we start to list traits we would call virtues, we see a large overlap with Aristotle’s list (see Books III and IV).

However, there are at least two very important differences. First, at least since the writings of St Paul, strength of will has been recognised as virtuous. When someone isn’t disposed to act morally, but manages to do so by strength of will, we think highly of them. For Aristotle, this actually shows a weakness of character; the properly virtuous person doesn’t find acting well difficult. Of course, he accepts that it is better to act well through effort than not act well at all. But ‘overcoming temptation’ is not a sign of real goodness, but a sign of a weak or unvirtuous character.

Second, Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia* involves much more than acting ‘morally’ as we would understand the term. And so the *arête* he thinks are necessary for a good life don’t match, and sometimes even conflict, with the moral virtues that we might accept. For example, he thinks we should have ‘proper pride’ (contrast the Christian idea of humility), being properly ambitious, and that we should aim to be ‘great-souled’ – do public works of magnificence and expense. Aristotle has a sense of the best life involving ‘cutting a figure’ in society, achieving a certain recognition. Morality has since become more closely associated with self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, and the traits we recognise as virtues more focused on securing welfare for others and a place for ourselves. Whether this is a good or bad development in the history of ethics can be debated.